TEMPTATION

--a sermon by the Rev. H. Paul Santmire
University Lutheran Church
The First Sunday in Lent
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"Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them; and he said to him, 'All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.' Then Jesus said to him, 'Begone, Satan! for it is written, "You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve."'" (Matthew 4:8-11)

The story of Jesus' temptation recalls to many of us, I suspect, elements from our early religious upbringing. If you think about it, you probably can recall very easily a group of little kids in Sunday School screeching at the top of their voices Sunday after Sunday, "Yield not to temptation, for yielding is sin. Look ever to Jesus, each victory to win." This, in turn, probably also recalls another experience, the time when you left Sunday School and home behind and began to look at the world with your own eyes. Then it was, perhaps, that you began to see the force of Oscar Wilde's oft-quoted assertion, "The only way to get rid of temptation is to yield to it."

But that was a long time ago. Today very few people are duped, either by a Sunday School morality or by its counterpart, Oscar Wilde's petty-bourgeois libertinism. Those two phenomena belong to the last century, howevermuch they may linger on in isolated cities or in isolated universities. You and I live in a post-World War I, a post-World War II, and a pre-World War III era. We know that temptation is a far more serious matter than either the Sunday School teacher of yesteryear or the likes of Oscar Wilde ever imagined. They domesticated temptation. We are faced with its full ugly force.

We are fortunate, in this regard, that the local stage should have recently revived the Ibsen play, the Master Builder. For Ibsen wasn't duped by a domesticated temptation. He saw through it, at least here and there. And he can help us to see more clearly, too. The two high-points in the life of the master builder are just that, highpoints. The first came when he climbed to the top of a church spire which he had built and waved his fist at God. The second came when, at the instigation of an Eve-like woman, -- here Ibsen perpetuates the male myth that the immediate cause of sin is always a woman, -- the second came when the master builder climbed a tower which he had built on his own home, this time to wave his fist at his fellow men. This is the Way of the Tower, the way of self-assertion. You climb to the top to establish and proclaim yourself.

In our day this is clearly the temptation for the nations. Perhaps it always has been, but in no era has it been so dangerous. This is the story of Latin America and Africa, the Near East and the Far East. Preeminently it is the story of the USSR and the USA. We are working to establish superior positions. We are staking out our territory. We are climbing the tower of self-assertion.

This, as we all know, has had some devastating results. Nationalistic uprisings are spilling blood almost daily. And the struggles of the big powers are trampling the small nations underfoot. Recall the Swahili proverb, that when two elephants fight it is the grass that suffers.

We should have a special word for ourselves at this point. That is, to be on guard lest we be confused by our own moral rhetoric, and believe that ours is the nation with the white hat, that ours is the nation of moral purity, that ours is the nation which will never attempt to assert its own interests at the expense of others. We can be well-

-2-

instructed by the words of a character in Measure for Measure:

> Most dangerous
> Is that temptation that doth goad us on
> To sin in loving virtue.

It's terribly easy for the nations at the top of the tower to confuse their self-assertion with virtue -- especially those nations which have a deep consciousness of a manifest destiny.

But self-assertion at the expense of others, the Way of the Tower, is not merely the temptation of the nations. It's the temptation of the churches as well. We all know, clearly, how the world missionary effort of the last two centuries was intimately tied to Western self-assertion. Here we are judged by the saying of the blacks in South Africa: when the whiteman came, we had the land and he had the Bible; now we have the Bible, and he has the land.

I am afraid that our church is still infected with that kind of self-assertion, if not so blatantly. For some years now the urban lawyer and social critic, William Stringfellow, has been asking embarassing questions about the Church and the inner city. On the one hand, he has underlined the widely recognized finding that the church has run from the problems of the inner city into the suburbs. (That point we all know well, although we are sometimes strangely unperturbed when we think and talk about it.) But even beyond that, Stringfellow has questioned the whole direction of the church's so-called urban mission. He has found this mission highly paternalistic and highly self-centered.

To cite a contrast from our gospel lesson last week. There Jesus is depicted as being on his way to Jericho when a blind man sitting by the roadside calls out to him. Jesus stops, comes over to him. But before he does anything, he asks the man: "What do you want me to do for you?" Then, and then only, does Jesus respond to the man's need. It's clear, Stringfellow and others have observed, that the church has not generally been willing to ask people in the city Jesus' question. Even those few Christians who have not fled the city, then, have tended to assume that <u>their way</u> of doing things is the right way -- a hidden disposition of self-assertion. The church, I am saying, seems to have been inclined to choose the way of self-assertion in its mission at home no less than in its mission abroad.

I should add here one further observation about the Way of the Tower. It is the way of increasing isolation. The figure is correct here. As you attempt to climb the tower, you leave the rest of mankind behind. You alone are king or queen, at the top. Mankind becomes your <u>environment</u>, which more and more you manipulate as you see fit. The extreme example of this, of course, is not in literature, but in history. It is not the relatively tame figure of the master builder in the Ibsen play, it is the demonic figure of an Adolf Hitler in the frightening story of our own century. That is the logical end-result of the way of self-assertion.

Contrast the story of Jesus, -- the <u>Way of the Cross</u>, the way of self-giving. "Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them; and he said to him, 'All these I will give to you, if you will fall down and worship me.' Then Jesus said, 'Begone Satan! for it is written, "You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve."'" Jesus rejects the demonic temptation of self-assertion and chooses total allegiance to the God of Israel.

And it seems clear that the gospel writer is telling more here than just the story of a single man. In a certain sense, according to Matthew, what occurs here is a world-historical story. It is the drama of the God of Israel coming into the world himself to establish the

possibility and the reality of the way of self-giving. The propensity of mankind has been the way of Satan, the Way of the Tower. Now, according to the perspective of Matthew, the new possibility and the new reality is the Way of the Cross, -- coming down from the highpoint of self-assertion to the lowliness of self-giving.

That of course is the story of Jesus' life, as it's depicted in the gospels. He continually resists the temptation of self-assertion and continually seeks out the outcasts of society. He ministers not to any need of his own for power and glory, but to the needs of publicans and sinners, prostitutes and lepers.

Is the Way of the Cross viable for a nation? Can it be real for a nation? I think the answer is Yes. Although, we should be cautious here lest we lapse into an unrealistic appraisal of the malleability of political power. In many ways the policies of a nation can be worse than the evil desires of any single individual. This was the lesson Reinhold Niebuhr tried to teach in the thirties, the lesson of Moral Man and Immoral Society. Individual self-assertion has a way of being expanded and exaggerated in a national context. Witness the present struggle in Viet Nam. We can imagine that very few individuals in North Viet Nam and very few in America desire the carnage of that war. But it goes on nevertheless, as a result of national policies.

So we must not be so naive as to call upon a nation, either over there or here at home, to repent of its self-assertion entirely and accept, as a nation, the Way of the Cross. But I think we can call upon a nation, wherever it may be, to shape at least some of its policies according to the way of self-giving, especially a nation which has much to give and little to lose. "Everyone to whom much is given, of him will much be required."(Lk. 12:48) We will not expect heaven on earth, then. We will not anticipate that the nations will lay down their swords and beat them into plowshares all at once, or even gradually over the course of many years. But we will work to shape individual policy decisions, as much as possible, according to the Way of the Cross. We will try to direct policies down the mountain toward the outcasts of the world, rather than up the mountain toward sheer self-assertion.

Berthold Brecht once remarked that when he visited a placid fishing village, with its picturesque white buildings bathed in sun and contrasted to the dark blue ocean, he saw first of all the torn fishing nets. So when we see the pyramids of Egypt, we should see first of all the thousands of brutalized slaves who were used to build them, and then only their magnificent achievement. Likewise, when you see an impressive government policy, you will ask how it will affect the poor people of the nation and the world. And you will work to shape that policy so that it benefits them rather than tramples on them. That is the Way of the Cross applied to the affairs of the nations.

In a like manner, but much more directly, the affairs of the church will be shaped by the Way of the Cross. Not too long ago the Episcopal Bishop of the city of New York announced that the long unfinished tower of the mamoth cathedral church of that city would not be finished as long as poor people suffer as they do in the inner city. That is perhaps <u>the</u> parable for the American church of our day: Stop building your own towers and turn to the needs of the suffering in the city.

This will <u>cost</u> us, I'm sure. We may not be able to have the kind of art or music or architecture we want in the Church. We may not be able to pay our clergy according to the manner to which some of them have grown accustomed. We may not be able to get away with giving the regular pittance some of us give in the Sunday offering plate. The Way of the Cross, if we follow it, will cost. But that has always been the

-4-
result of worshipping God and not mammon.

And, as anyone who read the report of the presidential commission on urban disorders now knows, the time is at hand for the churches to muster an immense commitment and immense resources to minister in the city. Less will not do. That is, either we come down from our comfortable religious towers and go into the despairing cities or everything, our towers included, may be blown to pieces. Time is running out.

Where do I begin?, you ask. That's a good question, for each of us has to begin. I suggest that we begin this morning by eating our Meal together not as our private ceremony, but as one moment in God's world-historical process of self-giving which he brought to fulfilment in the man Christ. I suggest that we taste the bread and wine not just as gifts meant for us, but as a Life broken and poured out for the whole world, especially for the hungry and those of low degree. This is truly to worship the Lord our God.